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Iowa House passes education bills on free speech, social studies

BY: **ROBIN OPSAHL** - MARCH 3, 2026 7:07 PM

Students' class materials stored in a classroom at Broadway Elementary School in Denison, as seen Jan. 7, 2026. (Photo by Robin Opsahl/Iowa Capital Dispatch)

The Iowa House passed several education measures Tuesday, including bills related to students' free speech and social studies class standards.

House File 2336, approved in a 63-33 vote, would ban schools from discriminating against or penalizing students for engaging in religious, political or ideological speech. Specifically, the bill would prevent schools from taking action to limit the speech or punish students for expressing certain viewpoints on an issue, if other "similarly situated students" are not prevented from speaking on or presenting a different opinion the issue.

The bill also would require school districts to adopt policies and annual trainings for educators "regarding constitutionally protected prayer and religious expression in public elementary and secondary schools," alongside annual certification of compliance.

Rep. Samantha Fett, R-Carlisle, said the bill "protects personal expression and ensures that religious and political viewpoints are treated equally and without discrimination."

But Rep. Angelina Ramirez, D-Cedar Rapids, said religious expression, political speech and ideological speech are already protected as First Amendment rights under the U.S. Constitution. She said the bill duplicates First Amendment protections already required in Iowa schools, while adding "another unfunded mandate on our public schools," including training and compliance requirements, as well as "new legal liabilities" for civil lawsuits, as the bill requires schools found by the court in violation of the measure are subject to a penalty of at least $5,000.

"I want us to be very clear on what this means," Ramirez said. "In practice, we are telling schools follow federal law – which they already must do – but now also document it, train on it, annually certify it to the state and face new financial penalties if someone alleges you got it wrong. Where is the funding to support that additional training? Where is the funding for the administrative time to track compliance and file annual certification, the funding for the DE to dedicate towards paying someone to follow up and confirm certifications? Those answers were never addressed. We don't have the funding for increased legal exposure."

Fett said the measure provides "uniform statewide standards" on First Amendment rights for students, saying currently, Iowa students "experience different rules, different interpretations and too often inconsistent or incorrect applications of the First Amendment."

"Students do not shed their constitutional rights at the schoolhouse gate," Fett said. "While the U.S. Department of Education provides clear federal guidance on religious and political expression, that guidance does not consistently reach at the local level. Many teachers, principals and school board members never receive it. This bill closes that gap by requiring annual distribution and training ,so every educator understands what the law requires. That clearly reduces misunderstandings, prevents conflicts and protects both students and schools."

Social studies standards

The House also passed House File 2510, a measure making multiple changes to Iowa's social studies instruction standards, in a 60-36 vote.

The bill requires social studies instruction to include information on federal, state and local levels of government, the history of the "secular and religious ideals and institutions of liberty," discussion of "exemplary figures in western civilization, the United States and state of Iowa," and the "cultural heritage" of western civilization. Many of the provisions were requirements under a 2024 law for social studies instruction, which created a task force to make changes to the state's standards. But Rep. Brooke Boden, R-Indianola, said the bill comes as the 2024 task force "missed the mark."

"The task force failed to follow our legislative intent," Boden said. "The new standards remain too vague, making implementation inconsistent and lacking straightforward, measurable

teaching of history and civics. So here we are back again with the same language to ensure that our standards are met."

The bill was amended to remove certain requirements duplicated through other legislation on civics education and addressing "prescriptive" language included in the bill on Holocaust language and instruction. The bill still includes requirements for U.S. history to include a unit related to the Holocaust, as well as "crimes against humanity that occurred under communist regimes."

Rep. Monica Kurth, D-Davenport, said the bill states the Department of Education "shall not use the draft social studies standards" that were created following the 2024 law. She asked why the Department of Education social studies experts who developed the curriculum did not comply with the requirements of the law.

"Could it be that it was highly prescriptive, highly slanted, in that the requirements in that law were not acceptable to them as experts?" Kurth said. "They favored an approach that gave guidelines, but not a step-by-step curriculum that could be considered not age-appropriate, and that presented a one-sided, unrealistic view of the development of this country."

She criticized the 2024 bill as being taken from the conservative think tank Civics Alliance, and that this year's bill is another piece of model legislation introduced by the organization. She quoted an interview with David Randall, executive director of Civics Alliance, who said, "we're only just getting the first wave of laws onto the books, so we're seeing day by day exactly how radical activists in bureaucracies sabotage or fail to enforce laws, and what needs to be done to ensure the laws go into effect.

"We have model legislation for oversight and compliance, but to make it most effective we need to see exactly what sorts of evasion and sabotage are used," Randall said. "But the most important thing is, we're not declaring victory and going to sleep just because a law is passed. We're keeping on working to make sure a law is enforced."

The state education department following the guidance of social studies experts in drafting the social studies curriculum standards prompted the state to go "into this next stage of this battle," Kurth said.

Boden disagreed with this characterization of the bill.

"This legislation is not slated and it is not one sided," Boden said. "This is not about politics. It's about preparation. It's about ensuring that our next generation understands the principles and liberty, of … limited government, civic responsibility. It is about equipping our students with knowledge that they need to preserve their freedoms that we cherish and I have the full confidence that our students are capable of learning that, even in the fifth grade."

Both measures go to the Iowa Senate for further consideration.